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ABSTRACT

A Ball State University course begun in December 1968 is designed to strengthen and improve the reading and study skills of 50 "directed admission" freshmen: students who have earned low SAT scores and poor high school grades. Prior to the experiment their college attrition rate had been 90%. During the first year large group techniques were used in directing exercises in vocabulary development, critical reading, and grammar fundamentals. Small group work became possible in the second year with the addition of a graduate assistant who gave considerable help to the poorest readers. The difficulty of motivating more nearly "average" students prompted complete individualization of instruction during the third year, while the fourth year featured structuring of the grading system and institution of student records of daily progress. Data indicate that significant improvement occurred during the first and third years in vocabulary, comprehension, and total reading achievement; statistically non-significant positive changes occurred during the second year. The attrition rate for students enrolled in the experimental program is 48%. (RD)

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A UNIVERSITY READING AND STUDY SKILLS PROGRAM FOR HIGH-RISK STUDENTS

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During the past decade, an educational development which cut across the areas of higher education and reading occurred. Students whose secondary school academic records and standardized test scores were low sought and gained admission to

expanding universities under the rationale that they deserved at least a chance at college and the social mobility it might afford them. It often became clear that without some special help in the first year, such students tended to fail and leave quickly. To give them a real chance for adjustment and subsequent success, such students were sometimes allowed to start in special programs designed to give them academic support. Since such programs have increased in number and some experimentation is still going on, a description of such a supportive program which has met with some success seems appropriate. This presentation is an account of the four-year evolution of a college level program in reading and study-skills for high-risk beginning students. To assist in the appreciation of the yearly changes in both the program content and organizational format, a brief account of the initial program appears appropriate. This will be followed by some generalizations which might be applicable to supportive programs at either the secondary or college levels.

DESCRIPTION OF INITIAL PROGRAM

Some years ago Ball State University initiated the policy of designating certain prospective Freshmen students as "Directed Admission Students". These students were so designated because their records indicated both low SAT scores and poor high school grades. Reports issued by the Admissions Office confirmed that these students were indeed "high-risk", since their attrition rate was approximately 90%.

Consequently, in December of 1968, Ball State University initiated an experimental program for fifty first-quarter directed admission students. The stated goal of this experimental program was to help these students remain in college, or to put it more specifically, to help them develop the reading and study skills necessary to maintain a grade-point average which would permit them to continue their studies if they so desired.

A major portion of the experiment was a course designed to strengthen and improve reading and study skills. The instructor had envisioned small group work centered about specific skill needs but found in practice that the maturity and motivational level of the students was such that a small group could not be depended upon to complete assigned tasks. Reluctantly the instructor attempted to utilize large-group techniques. After examining the results of the standardized reading test which had been utilized as a pre-test, the instructor arbitrarily determined a "core" of common experiences. Included in this core were such activities as vocabulary exercises, practice in critical reading, and reviews of the fundamentals of grammar, such as the use of homonyms, contractions, and subject and verb agreement. During a library experience each student went to the card catalog for a reference and then located it in the stacks. Limited practice with mechanical pacer or controlled readers was also provided.

CHANGES WHICH EVOLVED

In the second year of the program, a graduate assistant was added to the staff, making small group work possible. The make-up of these groups was determined by performance on the pre-test. Those students who performed below the tenth percentile were given much help by the assistant and kept in groups of no more than five. None of the other groups included more than ten students, since it was felt that as beginning Freshmen these students needed close contact with the instructor. Interestingly enough, the major problem identified during this year was the difficulty in building enthusiasm in those groups whose reading competencies were the greatest. Motivating those individuals whose competencies most nearly approached those of the "average Freshmen" was very difficult.

In an attempt to provide incentive, it was decided during the third year of the program to completely individualize the work done for the reading course. On the basis of the initial test score, an individual folder for each of the fifty students was planned. In each folder was placed certain "core" items, including vocabulary exercises and grammar reviews. In addition to these, each student was given several narrative reading selections at a level where the instructor felt the student could be successful as well as materials specifically emphasizing criti cal and inferential reading. The student "contracted" to complete the work in his folder in one week (four sessions). The instructor or graduate assistant tried to check each folder each

evening in order to comment on the progress each student had made during the day. A note such as "Great!" or "Let's try another exercise like this!" provided relatively quick positive reinforcement by letting the student know that the instructor was not only aware, but very concerned about the progress he was making.

CURRENT PROGRAM

The fourth year of the program, two major changes were carried out. The first was that of structuring the grading system; the second was that of instituting a student-kept daily progress record. Originally, the instructor had attempted to relieve the students of the pressure of grades and had attempted to grade in terms of effort rather than on accomplishment on tests. However, rather slowly and indeed reluctantly, the decision was made to make use of the "grade orientation" of the students.

Therefore, in terms of the "contract" between the student and the instructor, the requirements for an "A", "B", and "C" were clearly outlined, and each student's folder was evaluated in terms of a grade, once a week. At the end of each working session, the student recorded what he had accomplished that day. The instructor was careful to make an "A" possible for all students, since the determining factor became not difficulty level, but rather the number of completed exercises. However, the visible, written record of progress through progressively

more difficult material served as a motivating force. Although the decision to utilize this structured approach to grading was made reluctantly, the evidence gathered so far this year suggests that this method is the most successful one found so far.

STATISTICAL DATA

Since the improvement of the learning environment for the students in the experimental groups was considered more important than the maintenance of a rigidly controlled experiment, the data gathered did not warrant extensive statistical treatment. In order to determine whether there were statistically significant initial differences in the reading competencies of the three groups, the mean scores of each group on Form B, Diagnostic Reading Test Survey were analyzed. No statistically significant differences were found. After having been enrolled in the reading/study-skills course for one quarter, each group was given as a post-test Form A of the Diagnostic Reading Test Survey. Treatment of this data indicated that significant changes did occur in the areas of vocabulary, comprehension and total reading achievement for Group I (1968-69) and Group III (1970-71). Although the direction of change in Group II (1969-70) was positive, it did not reach statistically significant levels. Some descriptive data also demonstrates the kinds of change which seemed to occur. Of the 200 students who have participated in the program to date, 80 entered the

reading/study-skills course reading below the tenth percentile on the pre-test; forty-seven ended the first quarter still reading below the tenth percentile on the post-test. Thirty-eight students read at or above the thirtieth percentile when they entered the reading/study-skills course. Eighty-two students were reading at or above the thirtieth percentile on the post-test.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM IN TERMS OF STATED GOALS

Maxwell stated recently that the evaluation of a college reading program cannot be separated from the goals, objectives and practices of the program. (2). Reports of the Admissions Office indicate that the attrition rate for students enrolled in the experimental program is approximately 48%. At the present time 23 of the original fifty are seniors on campus, and one has already graduated. When the possibility of extending portions of the experimental program to all Delayed Admission Students was recently suggested, the reading program was one of the elements that was included in the projected first quarter.

EVALUATION OF ORGANIZATION FORMAT

Since the goal of the experiment was to assist the students enrolled in the reading/study-skills program to remain in college, changes were implemented as needs of students were identified or weaknesses in the original format were revealed. The relative success or failure of the various groups can be viewed as providing some information concerning the effectiveness

of various types of classroom organization: specifically, large-class, small group and individualized instruction. Analysis of data gathered during the first three years suggest that classroom organization, at least at the college level, is not a crucial factor when the amount of improvement by the students on a standardized reading test is the criteria utilized in making judgments. Statistical analysis of the pre-test scores indicate that there were no significant differences among the three groups of students who have gone through the program in terms of initial reading competencies as measured by Form B of the Diagnostic Reading Test. However, when the amount of change between the pre- and post-tests is considered, both large group organization and the individualized approach appeared to produce positive change to a statistically significant degree, while the small group organization was apparently less productive of positive change. Since this result was one which the instructor (possibly because of personal bias) did not anticipate, some hypotheses have been raised.

1. The limited amount of improvement reported for the small group plan may have been related to the social climate of the campus the year these students were enrolled in the reading/study-skills program. This year (1969-70) saw turmoil and revolt against the "establishment" reach its high point on BSU's campus. (It should be noted that this did not approach the levels reached on many campuses; however, some of these students seemed unusually responsive to the disruptive nature of the unrest.)

2. The change of directorship of the experimental program may have produced feelings of ambivalence in some students--in turn reducing their productivity.

3. Small group work may have threatened some students who felt the pressure of peers knowing their weaknesses.

While all the above factors may have operated, the apparent failure of the small group organization to produce the degree of desired change resulted in the move to the "individual contract" basis which has now been retained for the second year.

The "Typical" Student:

The "typical student" in this experimental program is reading at about the 15th percentile of the norms established for Freshmen on the Diagnostic Reading Test. The number of minority students in the program has steadily increased--moving from 18 percent the first year to about 33 percent this year. In general, students in the experimental group can be characterized as word-by-word readers who report that they do not enjoy reading on their own. A detailed analysis of their errors on the Diagnostic Test indicates that they have trouble identifying main ideas. These students when assigned to read a passage, dutifully plow through the material from beginning to end, without setting up any purpose and without using study aids. As a student in the group said, "By the time I get to the end of the sentence, I've forgotten how it began, or I'm feeling so sleepy I don't care."

These students feel that they learn more by listening than by reading, but their note-taking skills are limited, and their

organizational skills such as outlining and summarizing are quite meager, as are their library-related skills.

These students come to college labeled "high-risk". For some, this classification alone is enough to produce extreme anxiety. For others, the admission that they are part of the program is ego-damaging, or they fear it will damage their status among peers. For a few it seems to serve as a challenge for them to prove they really are college material.

Originally, it was rather naively assumed by the instructor that such a program would tend to attract students who were serious about hoping to remain four-years on campus, that there would be a "self-selective" element at work. In practice this selective factor works two ways: the program does attract serious, motivated students; however, it also attracts students whose parents are highly motivated. Frankly, this last condition engenders rebellion and resentment. Many of the most difficult-to-reach students fall into this classification. Military and marital pressures also play a role in the motivation of the student.

In passing, one further comment seems appropriate. The individual who found himself designated as a "directed admissions student" but whose skills on the Diagnostic Reading Test fell between the 40-60th percentiles, was frequently found to need special counseling. In most cases, there appeared to be evidence of some type of personality deviation which was interfering with the student's ability to concentrate and/or make progress.

MATERIALS UTILIZED:

The following materials although frequently not considered for use at the college level were utilized and found to possess characteristics making them highly appropriate for the type of student just described. (1)

Boxed Materials

SRA--American Album (Excellent to start with)
Manpower and Natural Resources
Reading for Understanding
Reading Laboratory IIIb
Organizing and Reporting Skills

EDL Workbooks, Filmstrips for controlled reader
Levels F, GH, IJ

Selected Materials from Tactics I and II

Teacher-made Materials

Vocabulary exercises
Matching phrases
Cloze-type exercises
Practices using SQ3R
Exercises on style of writing

GENERALIZATIONS:

Both continued observation and available data appear to justify the following generalizations about a "supportive" reading program at the college level.

Administration

1. Commitment at the highest administrative level is vital to the success of a supportive program. This commitment is usually demonstrated in terms of financial support, involving the willingness to staff such a course, provide materials, and reserve space.

2. Full acceptance of the program by the administrator directly in charge of the instructor and the physical facilities utilized by the program is important. Flexibility in the instructor's schedule is almost a must, since availability to individual students at various times throughout the day is an important supplement to the program. The freedom of the instructor to experiment and modify is desirable.

3. The assignment of a regular faculty member rather than graduate students or part-time personnel is preferable because the former is able to intervene on behalf of his students when the occasion demands it.

Materials

The materials utilized by high-risk students at the college level should possess the following characteristics:

1. Require a short period of time for completion. Ideally, the completion of several items during a fifty minute period should be possible. The attention span of the students is not easily sustained. Furthermore, reading is not a favorite activity; therefore, the end of the task should be in sight. Brief exercises also make possible a balanced skills program.

2. Require some type of response. The reader should have to do something after the passage is completed. Most frequently this is merely answering questions, but the listing of main ideas, important details, or drawing conclusions from the passage just read are desirable types of exercises.

3. Provide a change of pace. The provision of a mixture of types of exercises, such as questions over narrative materials, vocabulary practice, cloze paragraphs, timed reading, contributes to a balanced program of skills and helps the student avoid fatigue.

4. Provide background information which can help "fill in" informational gaps. The American Album (SRA) was chosen because it utilizes events in American history as subject matter.

Students

In order to meet the needs of students in supportive programs, the following points should be considered:

1. The student should be given materials with which he can succeed. This is especially important at the beginning of the program. Many of these students have never been told they were doing well. It is a motivational device without peer.

2. The students respond to a type of recording system which permits them to "see" that they are making improvement.

3. These students need frequent personal contact with the instructor, contact which reassures them that each is important as an individual to the instructor.